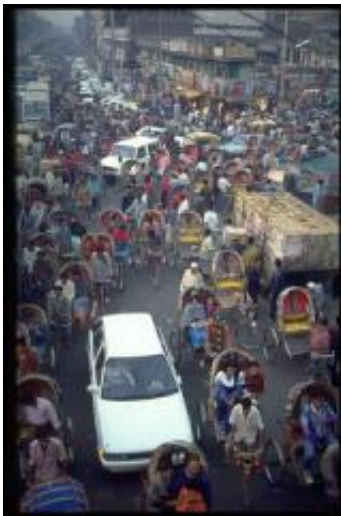


How many will we be? Are population estimates off the mark?

February 20 2011



“Almost all of the growth in world population will occur in poor countries, particularly in Africa and South Asia,” says the Population Council’s John Bongaarts. “But larger investments in family planning right now would have a very beneficial impact on human welfare and any environmental issue we care about.” Credit: The Population Council Inc.

In 2011 the Earth's population will reach 7 billion. The United Nations (UN) reports that the total number of people will climb to 9 billion in 2050, peak at 9.5 billion, stabilize temporarily, and then decline. Despite the confidence with which these projections are presented, in an American Association for the Advancement of Science press briefing and presentation today the Population Council's John Bongaarts presents

evidence that the actual population trajectory is highly uncertain.

What could happen depends on trends in fertility and [mortality](#)—and both variables are complex and not easy to forecast.

With respect to fertility, some analysts assume that the very low levels of childbearing now prevailing in Southern and Eastern Europe, where women have fewer than two children on average, will continue in those countries and spread to other parts of the world. But scholars have different expectations of how rapidly and widely that trend will unfold. If fertility remains higher than the UN projects the world [population](#) could exceed 10 billion in 2100.

In terms of mortality, pessimists say that life spans in developed countries are close to the biological limit. However, optimists predict that life expectancy will continue to rise very rapidly, exceeding 100 years before the end of this century. If the optimists are right, the world's population could also exceed 10 billion in 2100. This higher population scenario also has implications for the solvency of social security systems that provide income to the elderly.

"Almost all of the growth in world population will occur in poor countries, particularly in Africa and South Asia," says Bongaarts. "But if we make much larger investments in family planning right now, the number of people could be closer to 8 billion. Such an investment would have a very beneficial impact on human welfare and any environmental issue we care about."

Population Council vice president and Distinguished Scholar John Bongaarts conducts research on a variety of population issues, including the determinants of fertility, population-environment relationships, the demographic impact of the AIDS epidemic, population aging, and population policy options in the developing world. He is a member of the

U.S. National Academy of Sciences and served as chairman of the Academy's Panel on Population Projections.

Provided by Population Council

Citation: How many will we be? Are population estimates off the mark? (2011, February 20)
retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-02-population.html>

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